

Canadian Friends – On Communication

At Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM) in 2015 the Education and Outreach (E&O) Committee and the Publications and Communications (P&C) Committee jointly facilitated an evening program on communication. CYM is in a time of change, and changes to our patterns of communication are occurring both with and without our intention. We are a small yearly meeting of Friends who must connect over a vast geographical region. For two decades we have been in a transition from communicating with printed materials sent by post to exploring electronic communications. About 55 Friends at CYM 2015 examined challenges and opportunities of this transition and heard how E&O and P&C Committees have been working in this area. Information was collected from the Friends present that may assist meetings and committees within CYM.

Friends present responded to “Raise your hand if you” as follows*:

- Have easy access to the internet. 69%
- Use the internet to connect with Quakers (in any way) 76%
- Check your email at least once a day. 73%
- Check Facebook regularly 14%
- Have ever downloaded and read an e-book 38%
- Follow or are part of any Quaker Facebook Groups? 18%
- Follow any Quakers in your Twitter feed? 7%
- Have used video conferencing (e.g. SKYPE) to communicate 62%
- Have visited CFSC’s web site 64%
- Have visited CYM’s web site – quaker.ca 78%
- Check blog/news postings on quaker.ca 27%
- Have registered to use the Business side of quaker.ca 62%
- Have used quaker.ca to look at CYM documents 64%
- Have used quaker.ca for Quaker business 25%
- Are using electronic documents during CYM in session 44%
- Attend a MM or WG with typically fewer than 10 people at M4W 31%
- Attend a MM or WG with typically more than 30 people at M4W 18%
- Are part of a monthly meeting or worship group that distributes information electronically. 74%
- Your MM or WG has a system to make sure that those without internet access get information. 51%
- Have served on a Quaker committee (local or national) 78%
- Have participated in a committee meeting by telephone 69%
- Have participated in a committee meeting through video conferencing (e.g. SKYPE) 45%
- Read the printed Canadian Friend 64%
- Read the Canadian Friend on-line 25%
- Have written for the Canadian Friend 47%
- Know that there have been on-line education opportunities offered through CYM during the past year. 54%
- Participated in CYM’s on-line courses 9%

*(The percentages indicated are very rough, as hand counts may have been inaccurate.)

The responses seem to indicate that the majority of Friends who attended CYM 2015 use electronic technology for their Quaker information and committee work, but few rely on social media such as twitter and facebook. [note: there were few Young Friends present.]

Everyone present answered five queries and the answers were recorded (see below). Generally, we learned from this activity that Friends who attend Yearly Meeting well understand the value of CYM. They also understand that we must learn to use new technologies and be careful as to how we do this, so as not to jeopardize important Quaker principles of communication. We know that the new technologies are very useful and greatly enhance our work over great distances, but we are also aware of risks inherent in these technologies. Many suggestions were made about how to ensure that Friends are not left out of our processes because of lack of access to technology and also how we can support one another in learning to use new methods. Regardless of the advantages of electronic communication, Friends were united in the belief that face to face communication is essential, and is the best way to enhance our spiritual Friendships.

Following are the queries and the responses to them.

Query 1. What needs are met by connecting with other Quakers at the yearly meeting level that are not met through area gatherings, monthly meetings and in individual spiritual practice?

- We experience diversity of practice, views and theology and gain enriched insights.
- It's a richer deeper experience because of access to more very experienced Friends
- We gain a broader perspective and appreciation of differences across different regions of Canada.
- YM increases cross-Canada connections and brings a deeper sense of what is happening across the country.
- It's an opportunity to make new Quaker Friends that we see less often.
- Informal conversations with Friends from different areas make us more interested in them.
- YM is an opportunity to work and worship with a larger number of Friends.
- We can gain experience of deeper worship.
- The longer time together at CYM helps meet our spiritual and social needs.
- Attendance at YM inspires one to get involved with YM committees and the work of the larger organization.
- Through YM we understand better the complexity of issues we face and the wider group may bring forth more solutions.
- Opportunity to attend YM when it is nearer is important, especially when the local meeting is not strong.
- It's a good experience to be immersed in Quaker community for a whole week. We know one another more deeply.

- YM provides an opportunity to attend a series of Quaker studies or bible studies.
- At YM we have a closed intentional community which comes together in a challenging environment forcing us to really engage with Quaker process to solve problems.
- The opportunity to live in Quaker ways and values is re-energizing.
- It is beneficial to see some Friends infrequently, to see how we age and change over time and how our relationships evolve.
- The embodied connection at YM makes it easier to later have electronic connections.
- YM provides an opportunity to discover how other meetings are organized and how they use eldership and oversight.
- At YM Friends from small meetings gain experience in the conduct of Quaker decision-making with the benefit of a larger number of experienced Friends.
- YM provides an opportunity to experience good clerking and a more disciplined Meeting for Worship for Business.
- Friends bring home enthusiasm from YM that inspires others in local meetings.
- YM gives us knowledge of wider Quaker bodies, FWCC, FGC, FUM etc.
- It is better to meet one another face to face than to just read reports.
- YM gives us a larger sense of community, helps us grow relationships, gives an opportunity for deeper conversations.
- Young Friends YM is a good introduction to Quaker process.
- YM enhances greatly the participation and experience of Young Friends because of critical mass.
- YM is the only place to get a larger number of Young Friends together in a community that doesn't mean getting up early on Sunday.
- YM enables us to engage in different and larger projects.
- YM gives MMs a wider structure and ability to speak on a broader level.
- YM offers Canadian Quakers the opportunity to speak with one voice on special issues.
- YM provides exposure to great resource people and visitors from other YMs.
- YM is an opportunity to take decisions at national level.
- Through participation in YM the workings of the organization become apparent to Friends.
- Committees of CYM are different from Monthly Meeting committees.
- Participation in YM is important for small meetings.
- The wide variety of special interest groups provides a richer experience.

Query 2. Technology and limited resources are shaping our ways of communicating. Are we allowing ourselves to be changed, or are we choosing the course we take? How can we bring discernment and deliberation into our process of change?

Allowing or choosing?

- Combination of being forced and choosing
- We don't have a choice – the world is changing and we can't be left behind.

- Many are left behind and some choose not to embrace new technologies. Not all of us have the equipment.
- We have to work at allowing technology to change how we communicate because of the costs of our old ways. Therefore there is much learning to be done. We must learn how to inform ourselves in non-print ways.
- We must be open to change. We need discernment about how to include people and where to spend energy.
- Inevitably we are allowing ourselves to be changed and within that there are opportunities for choosing how.
- We are changing at a faster rate than we are comfortable with.
- There is a contradiction between the speed of technology and the pace of Quaker process – the speed of the technology changes our process. It's a big problem that people send messages and emails without checking them first; or send them too quickly without time for discernment.
- The technology does change the way we interact – it extends the distance, the amount of recording, pictures, time and documents. It can be hard to keep a worshipful presence.
- Different levels of ability and comfort create risks in our decision making.
- The new technologies create feelings of isolation – the carousel keeps moving faster – might fall off if can't keep up – forced to have the equipment and feeling overwhelmed at speed and diversity of devices, methods

How bring discernment?

- Are we forced into a direction we haven't had time to fully discern?
- It is difficult to discern with fewer opportunities for face to face. We have opportunities at MM and YM gatherings.
- P&C Committee can help with discernment. Through discussions we can reduce the negative impact of different computers and systems causing screwups. How do we choose which technology to learn? i.e. google docs or open source? What platform do we use? Is it secure? Are our communications monitored, or the property of an MNC? What might this mean for civil disobedience for example?
- Choice of platform dictates software and accounts. We need intentional discernment and decisions.
- We need to develop and follow guidelines for how we use technology.
- Trial and error – be open to new options – use what works. Take risks and assess.
- Are we creating a division between those with access and skills and those without? We need to be aware of the inequities of access to digital media. We need to be tender to people without easy access to new technology and intentional about including people.
- We don't know how it will change us.
- Possible dearth of resources – rare metals
- The medium determines what we say and how we say it – the message is disembodied and we are embodied beings.
- We need to be very mindful of the effect of technology on us and deliberately choose the way we use it – both personally and with respect to our CYM work.

And we need to take deliberate breaks from it. We need to be aware that we can be overwhelmed with the ease and volume of communications that we receive via new technologies.

- The experience of using new technology in committee work is excellent. It hasn't interfered.

Query 3. How can technology help with the geographic challenges, concern for the environment, and limited resources that impact our yearly meeting? Do you foresee any risks? What are they?

Help

- Skype video conferencing (eg quicker communication)
- Cuts down on face to face -- saves carbon footprint, saves money
- Instant information dissemination and feedback
- Cheaper
- More online courses
- More people can participate (if you can't travel)
- We can do almost anything with sufficient investment and training
- Scanned documents – online access for all
- Boon to isolated Friends
- Allows for potentially more meetings for committees
- Less paper potentially
- Same document can be in front of a group at the same time.
- If you know people face to face, can communicate via internet, but much more difficult without first a f2f meeting
- Allows us to do more, at a faster pace
- More people can participate

Risks

- Fibre optics, power, microchips, etc are bad for the environment
- Creates a hierarchy – those with most technology will have most involvement
- The shift to new technologies puts more demands on those who are familiar with them. How can we increase training for those who are not?
- Generational difference, computer literacy (need workshops). Will not be used effectively if there's not training.
- We are creating a cost shift: paper/printing/ mailing from CYM to paper/printing/internet access for individuals.
- Technological problems and glitches
- Not enough hugs
- An illusion of community for virtual Friends, not the same as face to face; harder to connect on a human level. We don't get to know each other in the same way.
- Easier to drift away or multi-task virtually
- Electronics is a door of a different shape – sometimes potential for miscommunication
- Harder to increase diversity in our groups (income, etc)

- Lose nonverbal communication
- Viewing/reading on paper vs screen can have effects on discernment
- System is highly vulnerable
- Overload of information, taking more time and causing stress
- Different forms of discernment used can be leaving people out of the process.
- Danger of losing the spiritual communication by replacing it with technical.
- Many have difficulty or aversion to reading on a screen.
- Discernment is more difficult when using conference calls or skype.

Query 4. There is wide disparity in the comfort level with new technology among Friends. How can we accommodate this diversity?

- Making sure that we keep Friends without the technology informed and involved
- Within a committee/meeting match or have technology buddies
- Mentoring and teaching with buddies
- Provided info for those who don't have the technology
- Continue old methods while adding new; the process is evolving
- Encouragement and patience
- Educating to use the technology
- Making it easy to use
- Support the purchase of technology
- Modify what we offer
- Need adviser/troubleshooter in each group
- When a new person is added to a committee, consult with them regarding their familiarity with technology that the committee uses.

Query 5. What ways of connecting with other Quakers do you find most meaningful and important? why?

- At least 2 different interpretations of "ways" – venue (YM, informal get-togethers, committee meetings)
- -- method (face to face, email, skype, etc)
- face to face connection had overwhelming appeal (audibility, visual clues, tactile, hugs, worshiping, having fun, working together on projects) because the spiritual connection is greater
- potlucks
- having Quaker visitors
- video and voice communications are second best, after face-to-face
- email, though, lets people view and consider at best time and own pace; re-reading, record
- worship occasions have special meaning
- committees of care – supporting each other in challenging times
- road trips = depth of knowing

- face to face may give false clues, e.g. the way someone dresses may affect your idea about them unfairly
- Yearly Meeting Committee work
- face to face first to getting to know one another, then electronic to carry work forward
- conference calls work best when everyone knows each other. They are difficult when they don't.
- groups can intimidate some